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ABSTRACT

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) implemented a series of academic reforms, including the adoption of minimum academic standards, mandatory basic skills testing, and the establishment of new general education course requirements. In order to assess the success of the reforms in shaping the curricular patterns of MDCC students, an analysis of the transcripts of 1985-86 Associate in Arts (AA) degree graduates was performed. The study sample consisted of 377 transcripts selected from a total of 2,829 AA graduates. Of these, 54% began enrollment since 1982, 33% prior to 1982, and 13% transferred from other institutions. The students attended an average of 10.2 terms, skipping or stopping out for an average of 1.5 terms. The transcript analysis revealed that the new core general education courses were taken by 99% of the students. It was also discovered that all the students except one took the core courses prior to distribution courses, with 64% of the sample taking four of the five core courses as part of their first eight courses at college. (AAC)

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CURRICULAR PATTERNS FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE GENERAL EDUCATION REFORMS AT MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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JC 890 158

Curricular Patterns for Students Who Have
Experienced the General Education Reforms
At Miami-Dade Community College

Introduction

American higher education has engaged in periodic self-assessment, usually triggered by changing public demands. Since World War II -- the GI Bill, Sputnik, increased student access, civil rights issues, and student activism have led to evaluation of institutional purpose and broadening of the curriculum. The 1980s represent another turning point, and once again the issues are centered on curricula. Five major reports since 1984 argue that undergraduate education needs re-examination and reform.[1] SAT and ACT scores have declined while college grades have risen (grade inflation), students are being awarded degrees for amassing credits irrespective of coherent curricular content, employers are dissatisfied with the literacy of college graduates, and taxpayers are demanding accountability for their educational dollars. The most recent reforms report warns that there is "a mismatch between educational needs and current practice....At stake is the nation's ability to maintain its leadership in a competitive world."[2]

All of the reports stress the need to define in some way the knowledge and skills students should acquire during their undergraduate years, and to reward the kind of teaching that will provide it. A major criticism of the reforms papers is the lack of any strong faculty voice in these debates. While much is made of the faculty role in carrying out the reforms, public officials and administrators have set the priorities.[3] It is not clear whether faculty are too absorbed in their own disciplines to

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[1] The reports are: NIE Report. Involvement in Learning; NEH Report. To Reclaim a Legacy; SREB Report. Access to Quality Undergraduate Education; AAC Report. Integrity in the College Curriculum; and ECS Report. Transforming the State Role in Undergraduate Education.

[2] ECS Report, p. 2-3.

[3] Ostar, 1986.

have noticed problems in the undergraduate curriculum, or have simply been bypassed in the recent debates. What is clear is that no meaningful instructional reforms are possible without faculty support. The purpose of the present paper is to trace Miami-Dade's curricular history and to examine course patterns evidenced by Associate in Arts (A.A.) Degree graduates for 1985-86. The paper traces the college's curriculum reform, and the steps taken to remedy perceived inadequacies in general education. Whether policy changes on paper were translated into student behavior is addressed by a transcript analysis of course patterns of A.A. graduates.

The Drift Toward Student Accommodation: Miami-Dade in the 1960s and Early 1970s[4]

Curriculum changes at Miami-Dade during its first fifteen years of operation reflect the shift away from general education and academic standards that occurred nation-wide.[5] When it opened in 1960, the college enrolled 2,025 students on a single campus. Students pursuing "academic studies" were required to take 36 credits of general education core courses: 12 credits in communications; 12 credits in the natural sciences; and 6 credits each in humanities and social science. The particular courses were prescribed, and were designed to provide a basic liberal education. In addition, students were encouraged to take two years of a foreign language if they intended to transfer to a four-year institution. By the 1962-63 academic year, enrollment had grown to 7,697 credit students. In addition to fulfilling general education requirements, students had to either meet specified prerequisites or earn high enough test scores for entrance into college-parallel programs. A guided studies program used test scores to reduce courseloads and remediate low scoring students, while opening honors courses and independent study to high scoring students.

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[4]The material in this section relies heavily on volume III of the 1984 Institutional Self-Study, "Academic Policies and Curriculum Reforms."

[5]For an overview of these changes in higher education see Brubacher & Rudy, 1976.

By the 1974-75 academic year, over 58,000 credit students were enrolled at Miami-Dade's three campuses and allied health center. Systematic use of test score data had lapsed with the demise of the Florida Twelfth Grade Test, and each campus developed its own assessment and placement program.[6] The description of general education requirements took up only one small page in the catalogue. Required general education core course credits had been reduced to 24, with 6 courses now mandatory- two each in English, the social sciences, and the humanities. The remaining six natural science credits could be earned in any two introductory courses across five disciplines. Twelve additional credits were required in general education areas. For these, the catalogue noted "the choice available to the student is quite broad."[7] A student could earn an A.A. without taking a math course!

Educational Refcrms at Miami-Dade

By the mid-1970's some dissatisfaction with the general education program structure was evident. The College's 1974 Institutional Self-Study recommended a comprehensive evaluation of the general education program. It was felt that general education courses were too discipline bound, and did not synthesize knowledge across disciplines to provide liberal learning. Remedial assistance for students was also recommended to ensure that open access would not cause dilution of educational standards.

A general education study began in 1975 with the formation of a college-wide committee and input from consultants such as Ashley Montagu and K. Patricia Cross. A draft document of goals, definitions, and rationale was prepared and distributed to faculty for review. During 1976-77, a faculty/administrator task force was established on each campus to address particular curriculum questions and develop recommendations on how to implement the general education goals. Campus proposals were then reviewed

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[6]Miami-Dade Community College Institutional Self-Study, Volume II, Prescriptive Education.

[7]Miami-Dade Community College 1974-75 Catalog, p. 45.

by the college-wide committee. During the process, open meetings were held and input sought from departments and disciplines on all campuses.

During 1977-78, the college-wide committee prepared a single general education proposal incorporating as much as possible from the campus proposals. This was again distributed to all faculty, and numerous meetings were held with faculty groups and with students. A revised final proposal was then submitted to and approved by the College Committee on Academic Affairs. After approval by the President's council and Board of Trustees, the final set of recommendations on reforms was published as General Education in a Changing Society.[8]

The reforms developed during the study of general education encompassed three areas: academic standards; basic skills; and course requirements. Adoption of minimum academic standards was the first phase of the reforms, and was applied to new students in 1978. An early evaluation study noted that students under the new Standards were achieving at a higher level than historical controls.[9] A later study found increased persistence and improved grade point averages for minority students.[10] From the Fall Term of 1978 to the Fall Term of 1984, over 14,000 students were suspended because of poor academic progress. More than 50% of these students returned later, and of these, 10% eventually earned a degree.[11] The suspension rate has been declining each year, but it is estimated that by reducing credit loads of some students and suspending others, the college has lost a minimum of 1,000 FTE per year.[12]

In 1980, the second phase of the reforms began when uniform placement testing was re-established to ensure that students met minimum basic skills requirements. Three tests were chosen from the Comparative

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[8]Lukenbill & McCabe, 1978.

[9]Losak, Anandam, & Corson, 1981.

[10]Losak & Morris, 1983.

[11]Wright, 1985.

[12]Losak, 1983.

Guidance and Placement Program (CGP) developed by the College Board. During the phase-in of basic skills testing (1980), students were strongly advised to take college preparatory courses if their placement scores fell below a certain point. By 1981, all first-time-in-college students enrolling for more than 9 credits, all students enrolling beyond the 15th credit, and all students registering for English or math were required to be tested. Students enrolling in English or math courses had to satisfy basic skills requirements either by presenting adequate test scores or by enrolling in college preparatory courses. The efficacy of college preparatory coursework was recently analyzed and success rates for students satisfactorily completing courses in all areas where they were underprepared equalled that for students who entered the college with adequate basic skills.[13]

The final phase of the reforms involved new general education course requirements- the heart of the issues currently being raised in higher education. By the Winter Term of 1982, all new degree seeking students were required to take a general education core- a set of five courses specifically developed to address the goals specified in General Education in a Changing Society. The goals were grouped around the concepts of fundamental skills, the individual, the individual's goals for the future, the individual's relationships with other persons and groups, society and the individual, and natural phenomena and the individual. The required general education core courses were Communications, Humanities, The Social Environment, Energy and the Natural Environment, and The Individual in Transition. These five courses were designed to cut across discipline boundaries. Distribution courses were also specified in each area, with some choice available to students. In theory, general education core course would be taken before distribution courses in each area, and specialized program courses would begin only after some Core was completed. It is important to note that the application of this policy depended entirely on the student advisement process. No computer "locks" were established to prevent students from deviating from the curricular prescription.

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[13] Losak & Morris, 1985.

Curriculum Patterns at Miami-Dade: 1985-86 Associate in Arts Degree Graduates

In order to assess the success of the reforms in shaping curricular patterns of students at Miami-Dade, an analysis of transcripts for 1985-86 A.A. degree graduates was performed. The random sample consisted of 377 transcripts from a total of 2,829 Associate in Arts degrees, which were examined and coded by Institutional Research staff. Of the 377 graduates, 54% (n=202) began enrollment since 1982, 33% (n=124) began enrollment prior to 1982 and 13% (n=51) transferred from other institutions. The average number of terms attended was 10.4, and the average number of major terms was 6.2. In the total sample, 1.5 major terms were skipped on average ("stopping out"). The transfer students attended for 4.6 major terms, and transferred in an average of 24.8 credits.

For the Miami-Dade origin group (n=326), 62% began enrollment since 1982, and 38% began enrollment prior to 1982. The group of interest for curricular patterns is that of students enrolling since 1982 when the new core curriculum was established (n=202). The reader should note that graduation during the 1985-86 academic year means that these students completed their degree in three years or less- indicating that they were primarily full-timers and had few basic skills or language deficiencies. While this sample is adequate for determining whether the general education prescriptions are being followed, it represents only 54% of the total transcripts examined.

Were the Core courses taken by all graduates? The answer is a virtual yes. The new Core appeared on 99% of transcripts, with only three students missing a course.

Were the Core courses taken prior to distribution courses? Again, the answer is yes. In only one instance did a distribution course appear before the designated Core course for the area. Further, 64% of the sample took four of the five Core courses as part of their first eight courses at the college. Most students began with several Core courses and then moved into distribution courses for those Core areas. The remaining Core and distribution courses were intermixed with courses for the major.

What patterns of Core, distribution, and major coursework were evident? A breakdown of the most prevalent patterns reveals the following:

* 47% of students took Core as part of their first eight courses, followed by distribution and major courses taken concurrently.

* 25% of students spread the Core beyond their first eight courses and were taking Core, distribution and major coursework fairly evenly across semesters. Distribution courses were taken only after the appropriate Core course, however.

* 11% of students took Core as part of their first eight courses, mixed distribution and major courses after that, but finished by taking a concentration of courses in the major.

* 7% of students spread the Core beyond their first eight courses, mixing Core, distribution and major coursework across semesters, but finished by taking a concentration of courses in the major.

Summary and Conclusions

Miami-Dade's General Education reforms anticipated the concerns currently being voiced in higher education. Further, the initial planning of new coursework included strong faculty involvement. The educational reforms were not limited to a reanalysis of general education, but also included student assessment and tighter academic standards. An analysis of graduate transcripts reveals that students are following the curriculum prescriptions that arose from the study of general education.

The reader should note that general education at Miami-Dade is undergoing review again beginning this year. Faculty have now had considerable experience teaching the Core, and are in a good position to make suggestions for improvement. Additionally, the second major focus of the call for higher education reforms-- identifying and rewarding good teaching-- will be a major project at the college for the next few years.

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